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AUTHOR Lederman, Marie Jean
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ABSTRACT

Open admissions as an educational policy in higher education depends upon the success of remediation programs in English and especially in composition courses. Because so many English majors will spend part of all of their professional lives teaching, their training at both the undergraduate and graduate levels should prepare them for teaching, but it does not. Writing is what English majors who teach know least about, and that is what they will spend most of their time teaching. One solution to the need for more teachers in remedial courses involves using English majors as tutors. Another approach to a remedial English course is to involve students in a team-teaching venture. The advantage of peer-tutoring and team-teaching is that students learn from each other, and this provides an opportunity for remedial students to improve their reading and writing skills while the English major acquires valuable teaching experience in the initial stages of education, long before he is responsible for several classes of students. (RB)

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The Metamorphosis: "As English Major awoke one morning
from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed
into an English Teacher."

Friday, May 3, 1974
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Marie Jean Lederman
Associate Professor of English
Baruch College, C.U.N.Y.

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The understated shock which is the first line of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" is not altogether unlike the moment experienced by most English majors as they confront their first class, whether that first class is in junior or senior high school or in college. Overnight, they find themselves transformed into English teachers, a metamorphosis for which little in their background has prepared them. It is this lack of preparation that I would like to discuss, and I would like to discuss it in relation to another problem which we face in urban higher education at this moment of 1974: remediation in reading and writing on the college level.

The problems are, at first glance different; one deals with the education of students whom, as an old English major myself, I modestly call "gifted," and the other deals with those students whom we classify as "remedial." My thesis is that both problems could be attacked together. The greatest disservice which we do to our many English majors who do, eventually, teach on one educational level or another is that we provide them with almost no real experience in teaching early enough so that they can find out whether or not teaching is the profession for them before they are irrevocably and forever committed to it. As early as 1907 in an NEA report we read that "the twentieth

century must find some means 'to discharge, ammove, and
avoide' all persons who would make 'insufficient' teachers,
or the profession of high school teaching will never rise
to Elizabethan greatness."¹ That lovely expectation is as
far from reality today on all levels of English teaching as
it was in 1907. However, we can construct a requirement for
English majors which would put us a step or two closer to
"Elizabethan greatness" in English teaching by providing
prospective English teachers with early teaching experiences
without ever going outside of the classrooms of our own colleges.
At the same time, we can help to meet the needs of our remedial
students by enlisting the aid of students who happen to be
exceptionally gifted in the arts and skills of reading and
writing; presumably, many of these will be English majors.

Open Admissions as an educational policy in higher
education depends upon our success or failure in our efforts
to cope with the problem of remediation on the college level.
Although I am a strong advocate of Open Admissions at C.U.N.Y.
and have worked in programs designed to make it succeed, I am
not blind to the factors which mitigate against its success:
the financial, physical, emotional, and academic problems of our
students; the varying attitudes of enthusiasm, elitism, and
hostility among the faculty; the enormous financial burden to

the administration. As we experiment in a field of college remediation that is in its infancy, we are not going to show instant success. That, in relation to the booming cost of Open Admissions is going to force, and has forced, administrations to increase class size while at the same time we attempt to individualize instruction for remedial students. This cost factor is a strong argument for trained student tutors. The New York Times indicated in February of this year the development of "new working arrangements that are expected to produce major innovations in school and college practices here." One of the ways this will be done is through the "establishment of a tutorial program in which thousands of college students who are preparing to become teachers would tutor public-school pupils who need individual help."² This is a sensible move; an equally sensible move, easier to implement and as important, would be to have students tutor remedial students in their own colleges -- but these tutors must be trained and supervised.

Let's turn from the needs of remedial college students to the gap in the education of our English majors and look at how this gap should be filled. Because so many English majors will spend part or all of their professional lives teaching, their training (both undergraduate and graduate) should prepare them for it, but in the past it has not. This is indicated from

diverse sources. The need to understand how to teach subject matter to students has long been recognized in the preparation of elementary school teachers. The 1907 NEA study on the preparation of high school teachers reflects the glimmerings at that time of an acknowledgment that high school teachers should have a similar understanding of how to teach their subject areas.³ Now, in the 1970's, we are beginning to acknowledge the very radical next step: college teachers must also know how to teach their disciplines to students. Edmund L. Volpe, as Chairman of the English Department at City College, C.U.N.Y., writes of the problem of negative teacher-attitude towards teaching remedial writing and the fact that this results in a lack of success:

Sad as it may be, given the enormity of our responsibility for the teaching of writing, that is a fact, and until our graduate departments begin to pay some attention to the importance of learning how to teach writing, even to the importance of teaching per se, that fact will not change. It is in the graduate schools where our professional priorities and values are established, and at present these priorities and values have little to do with the realities of undergraduate teaching in junior colleges, in most small senior colleges, and in an increasing number of our major colleges and university undergraduate programs.⁴

Professor Volpe is speaking of graduate Departments of English, not Education. New to ideas of teacher-training, he seems to rely overmuch on the idea of more courses (although this time

in methods of teaching) to train teachers for college teaching. Another report on the "Preparation of College Teachers" indicates a broader need "to recognize the need for better college and university teaching by providing graduate students new opportunities to acquire teaching sensitivity while fulfilling the other requirements for the degree."⁵ The key here is "teaching sensitivity," which does not necessarily imply courses in isolation but might very well imply teaching experiences under some kind of supervision.

Recently, the National Council of Teachers of English passed the following resolution:

RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English apprise graduate English departments of its rising concern for improved quality in the preparation of graduate students to teach effectively at the college level. Be it further

RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English encourage such departments to accept the responsibility of providing education in basic pedagogical skills through formal programs, internships, and other comparable experiences.⁶

This resolution not only focuses on the need for additional preparation of future college teachers of English but indicates specifically that such preparation should include practical, supervised teaching experiences.

These voices reinforce my main point: whether the

English major goes from an undergraduate degree or a graduate degree into teaching English at any level, he should acquire some first-hand supervised experiences in teaching English. One can make a strong argument that the earlier the English major can have such teaching experiences the better. The first experience in teaching should, ideally, come before the Senior year or the first year of graduate school when students now may spend time student teaching. The arguments for teaching experiences early in a student's undergraduate career are many and persuasive.⁷

Active and not merely passive learning experiences are important. In an interview on the future in education, Alvin Toffler isolates two major changes in the 1970's, "one has to do with action and action learning -- with moving education outside the classroom and involving learners with the real-life activities of society."⁸ Certainly working with students who are having trouble reading and writing in college is a real-life activity. As many of us may, perhaps, remember, such real-life activities were often missing from the curriculum of the English major. One former English major, now in graduate school, voices a familiar complaint:

My life had been that of a student and as a student I had been taught -- and I had learned -- to read and discuss books, not to become socially and politically involved;

in fact, if anything, I had been discouraged from such involvement. In discussions of literature I had been carefully trained to resist bringing up social, political, and personal implications of the work of literature being studied. I was told these associations were beside the point, that I was moving away from the text. And it is primarily because they have been labeled taboo that I now feel this sense of isolation in my study of literature: from larger issues, on the one hand, and from myself, on the other.⁹

Without getting into a discussion of the varying philosophies of literary criticism, it is not hard to see that some of the sense of isolation from the real world could have been lessened if this English major had some contact with students to whom she had helped teach literature or writing in response to literature.

Writing is what English majors who teach know least about, and that is what they will spend most of their time teaching. This is, by the way, no new phenomenon. The cry "Our Students Can't Write!" did not come in with Open Admissions. From 1928 to 1973 studies indicate the problems involved in teaching college students how to write; they imply, if they do not state, that English teachers have not done a good job teaching them.¹⁰ How can we reverse this trend?

As a requirement for both the undergraduate and graduate English major we can insist on practical experience,

over an extended period of time, in working with students. This might take the form of a course given by the English Department in the teaching of writing. This course would also be open to other students who have demonstrated proficiency in writing and an interest in working with people. The course could meet once a week as a class; students would be assigned to field work in the college for an additional three or four hours a week. This field work might take one of two forms: (1) supervised tutoring of individual students in a writing workshop or (2) team-teaching in a remedial writing class with an experienced English teacher. Both approaches are being used, experimentally, in various units of C.U.N.Y. Let's take a look at these two possibilities.

An example of a course involving peer-tutoring is conducted by Professor Ken Bruffee at Brooklyn College. This course is three credits; students can earn credits in independent study for tutoring during subsequent terms. Bruffee writes of the principle of peer-tutoring:

Students learn well from each other, and in fact when one student teaches another, both learn. This happens especially when the students involved have similar ethnic or national backgrounds, and related experience. For this reason we feel justified in offering course credit to peer-tutors who work in the Writing Center. Peer-tutors register for a course designed to serve as

a support group. (This course is now nominally a special section of English 1.12, Advanced Composition.) Students taking this course attend class training sessions regularly, keep a subjective log of their classwork and tutorial work, read selected short essays on education and writing, write several short papers based on their experience as students and tutors, and tutor in the Writing Center two to four hours a week.¹¹

Bruffee's emphasis is not, however, on training the English major. He specifically tries to recruit, through teachers of regular Freshman English courses, students who have passed the course but, more important, who seem particularly good at working with others. He sees this experience as training for leadership in general rather than training for teaching in particular. This will develop a core of students who, by the time they graduate, will have a thorough knowledge of education and the ramifications of Open Admissions. Because of the focus of the program, Bruffee may be able to have students tutor students of a similar ethnic or national or economic background. While this would be obviously advantageous, it might not be possible to always do this if one requires such a course of all English majors. Without belaboring the point, it is unlikely that the ethnic, national and economic backgrounds of English majors and remedial students will be similar. It might be interesting to see, however, if the creation of positive experiences with non-authority

figures such as peer-tutors might ultimately make English majors out of some of the students who initially have trouble with writing.

Another approach to such a course would be to involve students in a team-teaching venture in a remedial class. Professor George Held, in the English Department at Queens College, C.U.N.Y., has taught and described such a course. He teaches a seminar in "Teaching Good Prose." Students earn four credits (one for the weekly seminar and three for the section of remedial writing which they team-teach with a regular faculty member.) The course grew out of the failure of regular composition teachers to deal with the writing problems of many Open Admissions students.

One of the main difficulties encountered was the creation of a classroom atmosphere favorable to learning; most of these open-enrollment students had had a history of unpleasant experiences in high school English classes, where their writing had been ignored or, if attended to, had branded them failures. Thus it seemed hopeless to expect these students to overcome their writing problems in still another conventionally organized composition course.

It was suggested that capable juniors and seniors be paired with faculty members to¹² team teach this course in remedial English

Held describes the structure of the teams and some of the practices used in teaching and evaluating their students.

The initial program worked so well that it has since been expanded. The advantages to the team system are many:

The student teachers are usually closer in age to the freshmen enrolled in the 01 classes; they bring a fresh perspective to the class; and often they can communicate more easily with the freshmen. The team approach also allows for either twice as many or longer conferences with the freshmen. If the skill level of the class is uneven, the class can be divided so that the freshmen can receive more individualized instruction. Having two people judge the freshmen's writing demonstrates the fact that writing affects different readers in different ways.¹³

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these two approaches. Both, however, provide additional individual help for remedial students and, at the same time, provide the "real-life" experiences which are necessary for a prospective teacher of English. In fact, I don't think that one semester of such training is enough. I think it is not unrealistic to expect students to continue tutoring remedial students in subsequent terms. This can be done by allowing the tutors to earn credits in independent study and/or earn money for their time.

But what about the English major who does not intend to teach? Why should he or she have to become involved in such endeavors as tutoring or team-teaching? Because the tutor's own writing skills will invariably become sharpened

as he or she must think them through in order to teach these skills to someone else; all of us who teach understand that this happens. Because the English major who is sure that teaching is deadly dull may have a change of mind and heart after some experiences in teaching. Needless to say, the opposite is also true; the earlier such a decision can be made, based on real experiences, the better. Because students who also teach gain an appreciation of the teaching process that may be useful to them as students, whether or not they do eventually teach English; at some time in their lives they will probably be involved in informal teaching of their own children or of others in business or the community. Because we badly need some altruism in our relations with each other. Students who don't read and write well are not going to get through college, and this fact will have a most dramatic impact on their lives. Those students who are verbally gifted ought to be encouraged to feel some responsibility towards helping those who are less verbally gifted get that chance. Too often now the brighter (i.e. more verbal) students look down at the "dummies" in the remedial English classes. Both groups have little chance to know each other and even less desire. As a result, stereotypes abound on both sides, and this should not and does not need to continue.

If we agree, and if our English Departments agree, that such a requirement should be instituted for our English majors, there are hurdles ahead. The obvious one has to do with "turf." Departments of Education, in some cases Schools of Education, will immediately feel that their territory is being usurped by the English Department. In fact, in two of the three units of C.U.N.Y. where such a course is given, the course is given under the name of an already established course, such as Advanced Composition or Advanced Linguistics. Field work has been tied to the course, after the fact, thus bypassing the usual procedures for course adoption. I think that this problem is important enough to be met head on. The best teachers of how to teach composition are college teachers of composition. Even if we haven't had spectacular success in the past, we have had more experience doing this than anyone else. If Departments and Schools of Education had been doing so well in training teachers on the lower levels, I suspect that we might not be talking of the need for such massive efforts in remediation in college. Certainly the responsibility of teaching college students to write is the responsibility of the English Departments. It is possible to handle such a course in an interdepartmental way, but I suspect

that this may heavily load the course with educational theories; it is essential to maintain the tutoring of students by students as the heart of the course. The only reason it should be a course at all is that fledgling teachers need both support and direction as they are learning how to teach; it is this function that the course serves.

There is a source of qualified, supervised and cheap labor to be found among our English majors as well as among other gifted and interested students. I suspect that this fact may make the proposal attractive to college administrations; I would not be above selling the course on that basis if that would get it adopted!

We need massive amounts of help in our remedial efforts, and we need this help immediately. We can get it and simultaneously insure that this next generation of English majors will awake from fewer uneasy dreams and be better prepared for their metamorphosis into English teachers than we were.

FOOTNOTES

¹National Education Association, Report of the Committee of Seventeen on the Professional Preparation of High School Teachers (July, 1907), p. 525.

²The New York Times, February 24, 1974, p. 30:1.

³National Education Association, Report, pp. 563, 582, 625, 642.

⁴Edmund L. Volpe, "The Confessions of a Fallen Man: Ascent to the D.A.," College English (April, 1972), 772.

⁵"Preparation of College Teachers" (Report adopted by the Commission on Institutional Affairs and distributed by the Association of American Colleges, November, 1971, "Liberal Education" (March, 1972), 60.

⁶"For the Members," College English (February, 1974.)

⁷For further discussion see Lila Lasky and Muriel Vogel, "Early Performance in the Field: A Head Start for Teachers," Kappa Delta Pi Record (February, 1974), 66-67; John R. Heter, "Career Education in Higher and Teacher Education," Kappa Delta Pi Record (April, 1973), 124-25; Kenneth M. Lansing, "Weaknesses in Teacher Education," The Educational Forum (November, 1973), 31-39.

⁸June Grant Shane and Harold G. Shane, "An Interview with Alvin Toffler on the Role of the Future in Education," Today's Education (January-February, 1974), 73.

⁹Nancy Burr Evans, "Looking Back Over Four Years: A Student's Approach to Literature," College English (December, 1973), 242.

¹⁰See Leon Renfroe Meadows, A Study of the Teaching of English Composition in Teachers Colleges in the United States (New York: Teachers College, 1928), pp. 21-23; The Reports of Four Committees of the Twenty-Nine College Cooperative Plan, The Academic Preparation of Secondary School Teachers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 1-4; Volpe, "Confessions"; Marie Jean Iederman, "A Comparison of Student Projections: Magic and the Teaching of Writing," College English (February, 1973), 674, 683-89.

¹¹Ken Bruffee, "The Writing Center," Cadre: Newsletter of the Freshman Writing Program (Brooklyn College, C.U.N.Y., July 25, 1973.)

¹²George Held, "Involving Student Tutors in Teaching Writing to Disadvantaged Students," Measure for Measure: Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1972-1973 (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English), p. 28.

¹³"Team Teaching," Faculty/Staff Newsletter (Queens College, C.U.N.Y., November 27, 1972)